

SPEECH

OF

HON. W. R. W. COBB, OF ALABAMA,

ON THE

SLAVERY QUESTION.

DELIVERED

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THE SLAVERY QUESTION.

In Committee of the Whole on the state of the Union, on the President's Message relating to California.

Mr. COBB said:

Mr. CHAIRMAN: Having hitherto failed to give public utterance to my sentiments relative to the many questions before this body and the country, and particularly to the question of the organization of proper governments for the lately acquired territory from Mexico, a crisis having now arrived when every man is expected to do his duty, I shall, humble as I am, endeavor to do mine. Sir, I appear not to make a speech, as it is usually termed, for *Buncombe*, but, in candor and honesty of purpose, to address this House; not that I expect so humble an individual as myself to be able to edify, but I shall endeavor to admonish. In doing so, I shall not survey the grounds of dispute between the North and South, further than to notice briefly and respectfully the remarks of a few gentlemen who have been pleased to comment on the position and condition of the South, as it will be my chief object to *allay*, rather than *create* or renew, the excitement which has been productive of the heavy heavings of the bosom of this once-tranquil and happy Republic. But, before I proceed to notice those remarks, allow me to approach disputed ground, and, perhaps, politically a crumbling precipice. Sir, in times like these, a man—yes, the statesman—should lose sight of himself, in a political point of view, and march up boldly, though it may be to the very threshold of self-destruction, to his duty, and, regardless of personal results, support those measures and take that course which will better secure the salvation of his country. Sir, what is a man's political or personal aggrandizement, or even that of this whole Congress? Should *every member of us fall*, and our country be saved, have we not done well? My motto is, "Do justice, though my political sun shall set to rise no more." My duty, as I conceive it, is not to play the diplomatist, but to act the statesman. Therefore, I place myself under the motto of my country, and swear ever to protect it; knowingly to do nothing but what is right, and submit to nothing that is wrong; and under this inscription, I will now approach that delicate subject, the admission of California as a State into the Union, with proper boundaries.

But, before I can decide properly, I have a few questions to propound, and to them I would like answers. First, who framed the Constitution of California? Were they *qualified American citizens*?

If so, how many *participated* and *acquiesced* in its adoption? Is a number requisite to entitle them to a representation upon this floor? Is their constitution republican and in accordance with the requirement of the Federal Constitution? The latter inquiry being answered by their own constitution now before us, it only remains for the other questions to be properly answered. Being so answered, I am for the admission of California, with proper boundaries. But, at the same time, whilst I mete out justice to California, I shall ask that justice be done to the residue of the newly-acquired territory, by the organization of territorial Governments, upon the principle of *non-intervention*, and by hearing and respecting the prayers of the people in said territories, as well as of those in California. Why, it should not be so, I have not yet heard an intelligent reason. Are the expressed wishes of eighty-thousand souls in the Territories not as soon to be heard as those of the people of California? If not, tell me why. Are they not as much entitled to express their own wishes as to the local laws by which they are to be governed, as the people of California. And do they not as much need a Government for their protection as California? I shall expect a sensible answer. I shall refrain from trespassing upon the House, to discuss the subject of slavery, and the many questions which it seems to have drawn around it, as I am sure there has been enough said to enable this House (if they will) to act properly. I waive that part of my subject, to present to my constituents face to face, if necessary.

I will now proceed to notice the remarks of honorable gentlemen upon this floor. First, the honorable gentleman from Illinois, [Mr. BISSELL,] in his speech delivered upon the subject of the admission of California, as my recollection serves me at present, did not state the true issue between the North and the South. The general tenor of his remarks would lead to the conclusion that the issue was upon the admission of California into the Confederacy; having, too, if I mistake not, never mentioned the passage of the Wilmot proviso, the prohibition of the slave trade between the States, or the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. No, sir, he made the admission of California the principal, if not the exclusive, ground taken by the South for a dissolution of this glorious Union. Sir, I challenge the gentleman on any other to point to any act of my State, or, if I am not mistaken, any other of the southern States, (with perhaps one exception,) that has

ever made that the sole issue, or even a prominent feature of the issue, between the North and South that would justify a dissolution. Now, sir, California will most likely be admitted by this Congress, if not this session, (unless prevented by a legal remedy of strict adherence to rights given to the minority under the rules.) In that event will the South, or any considerable number, attempt to bring about such a woful result? For one, I will not. Putting it, then, upon his issue, the admission of California, if she is admitted, and we submit, what kind of a spectacle do we present to the world? First, he says we have declared it a sufficient cause for resistance; and if we do not resist, it will be taken for granted that no danger may be apprehended, however much aggression may be perpetrated—that we will in like manner submit. But I repeat, this is not the issue that has been made up between the two sections.

Sir, to submit to a constitutional law is but the duty of the South; but as to an unconstitutional one, should such be passed, (which I believe cannot be,) it will then be seen what will be the result. For one, though I have been reproved for refusing to sign a southern address and a letter to my Governor, and by some denounced as not being true to the South—notwithstanding all this, *I would not submit.* But I am for all constitutional and legal means of resistance to be first resorted to; after they are exhausted, then it is for the people interested to apply a further remedy. I consider it to be my duty again to state, that it is my belief that no proviso as to the territory will be passed this session; and I have great hopes that, when the members return home and mingle with their constituents, (I mean the conservative portion,) and communicate with them as lovers of justice and this blessed Union, entertaining and expressing statesman-like sentiments, we will come together next winter prepared to settle this, as well as all other questions connected with slavery, upon the principles of the *Constitution*, of *justice*, and *non intervention*. Upon this platform I now stand, and I am sure I will come back standing upon the same rock of eternal justice.

One word as to the bills reported by the Senate committee of thirteen. There are several features in those bills to which, apart from a compromise and a desire to get rid of the question of slavery—that eternal barrier to the healthy and successful legislation of the country, I never, no, never, would agree. But as it holds out a light of hope—though I must confess rather a glimmering one, when I look around me and see the elements which are combining to its defeat—and being offered as a settlement to hush that storm which now threatens us, I for one will not stand in the way of its passage. As I have stated, it contains many features which may operate prejudicially to the South; but being questions of expediency alone, I feel that, with a few modifications, not only myself, but four-fifths of the American people would, for the *sake of peace*, be willing to subscribe to it. These were my opinions as to the proposition submitted by the committee; and entertaining such opinions, I was free to express them upon the conclusion of the reading of the report, not even then for a moment supposing but it would be strongly opposed.

Sir, as an evidence of my opinion that a committee might bring something forward out of which good might come, it will be recollected, that as

early as the 4th of February last I introduced a set of resolutions proposing to raise a joint committee of twenty-six—twenty on the part of the House and six of the Senate, equal in number from the North and from the South—to which I proposed to refer all the questions relative to slavery, &c. Those resolutions are as follows:

“Whereas a crisis in the political affairs of this Republic has arrived when men of all political parties are called on to aid in the great work of reconciliation between the northern and the southern people; whereas the questions of slavery in the Territories, the admission of California into the Confederation under her own constitution as a State, and the fixing her boundaries, the prohibition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and the abolition of slavery therein, are, and have been, a bone of contention for years past, and will be for years to come, unless settled; whereas the mind of the whole country is now fixed upon the present Congress, looking to them to consider gravely these vexed questions and have them settled upon constitutional and equitable principles between the two sections of the country, if possible; and whereas there are many men who have introduced plans, as they think, calculated to produce that effect, but owing to a spirit that too often prevails, (if not in this case,) that many wish the honor of bringing forward and consummating great and important questions, which come in conflict with each other, thereby perfecting nothing:

“Now be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, That a joint committee of the two Houses be appointed, consisting of six members of the Senate—three from the North and three from the South; and twenty from the House—ten from the North and ten from the South—to meet in conference to devise a plan if possible, predicated upon constitutional and equitable principles, adjusting all the difficulties growing out of the foregoing enumerated causes, and that such plan be submitted to their respective Houses for their consideration, thereby, if possible, to perpetuate the good feeling and union of the two parties forever; and that the members of the respective Houses, northern and southern, be allowed to select the members to form said committee in any manner they may think proper.”

My resolution being objected to by an honorable gentleman from Virginia, [Mr. MEADE,] it went to sleep in the tomb of the Capulets, never to be heard of again. A few days thereafter, the question, or a similar one—not so broad, I must be permitted to say—was patriotically brought forward in the Senate by the honorable Senator from Mississippi, [Mr. FOOTE,] which move of his has been productive of an able report of a committee, which I hope may fulfill their most sanguine expectations for the good of the whole country. When their report came in, I must confess it caused me to be a little superstitious to see the first honorable Senator who got up to oppose it, [Mr. PHELPS,] *stricken blind*, and obliged to sit down for a moment. I then thought—is not the hand of Providence in this peace-offering? I trust it is. If He does not continue to affect our vision, I hope He may affect all our *hearts*, to induce us to do our duty to Him and the country.

Sir, I will return to the remarks of the honorable gentleman from Illinois, [Mr. BISSELL.] He was pleased to say, that Illinois had been found among the foremost in the war with Mexico, and if it became necessary to cause submission on the part of the South, she could still find regiments to go down among us for that purpose, (or in substance this.) Now, sir, if gasconading is an evidence of valor, we had it again demonstrated by another honorable gentleman from Illinois, [Mr. BAKER,] (for both of the gentlemen, I must be permitted to say, I have a very high personal respect.) Yes, sir, if that is an evidence of northern valor, (or even southern chivalry,) we have had enough to prove our courage. Sir, if this could

make the South submit, "we have had enough to make us quail before them like killing flies with a bodkin." Yes, sir, the honorable gentleman from Pennsylvania [Mr. CHANDLER] was about to tell us (when the hammer fell and sealed his mouth, his hour having expired; I must confess, I was glad of it, for I did hope he would not say anything harsh, or endorse what had been said by other gentlemen) that old Pennsylvania had some of the chivalrous lads which she was ready to send down on a similar mission. I hope the old Keystone State may find herself better employed in protecting her iron interest, than to come down among us on such an errand. We desire to receive them all, and welcome them to our sunny clime as brethren, bearing in their deportment the emblem of peace.

Now, Mr. Chairman, when the gentleman from Illinois [Mr. BISSELL] spoke of the valor of the northern or western soldiers on the battle-fields of Mexico, and what they could and would do, provided the South should ever presume to dissolve the Union, for a moment I thought of beginning then, yes, right then, to call for the rocks and mountains to fall upon us and save us from a total annihilation from the face of the earth, by such a valiant and mighty foe. Sir, the gentleman from Illinois need not have told us that they volunteered and were brave men, when the records of the country—yes, and the very wings of fame bear abundant evidence of their distinguished and valorous deeds; we are well acquainted with, and admire them. And when the honorable gentleman drew the contrast between northern and southern valor, by alluding to the scene of 1814, upon this very *southern* spot—the taking by the British the Capitol, with a few worn out British soldiers, and three pieces of small artillery—stopping here; were you not led to believe that all the valor and chivalry belonging to the United States were confined to the West, if not in the two honorable gentlemen themselves?

But, sir, when I recovered from the shock produced by the thrilling eloquence of the gentleman, [Mr. BISSELL,] I began to reason, and ask myself, Is it possible that the South has never furnished a soldier or a patriot? The thought involuntarily rushed upon me to inquire of *history* who it was (leaving out all the battles of the Revolution) that led the troops during the late war with Great Britain, and achieved victory after victory amidst the iron hail at New Orleans. Yes, sir; and who it was that led the troops to glory and renown at Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Monterey, Buena Vista; and who it was that caused the almost impregnable walls of Vera Cruz to crumble into dust, and wrung from the Old World plaudits never before uttered. Yes, sir, and who was it that led on the invincibles that scaled the heights of Cerro Gordo, and marched through seas of blood, achieving victory after victory to the very gates of the Montezumas, and snatched from the cannon's mouth the palm of victory? Under whose command were our stars and stripes unfurled over that city? Long may they triumphantly wave, without one star or stripe being erased, is my heart's desire. Was it alone northern valor which did all this? No, no! Tell me no more of your northern valor, but come out like men, and say all, *all* are patriots and soldiers. Tell me not that it was the North or the South alone that achieved our

independence. Let not the North or the South claim exclusively to themselves the imperishable honors that followed the unsurpassed deeds of valor that won for this nation the rich inheritance we now possess in the war with Mexico.

Further: I have heard that it has been said that the North had the power to pass the proviso, and if the South did not submit they had *powder* and *lead* enough left to enforce it. I hope no such sentiment now exists among us. It was, perhaps, and most likely, said in a moment of excitement: we hope it was. O! may I not see the day when the banner of our kindred shall be unfurled in a coercive manner over our heads. When that moment comes, we may say farewell, farewell to this happy Republic. Yes, sir, that moment the death-knell of liberty will be sounded throughout the broad earth, and the nations that have been watching with so much anxiety our progress under a self-controlled government, with one burst of anguish and lamentation will cry out, all, all our hopes have vanished, for they have been our star of hope, but when we most anxiously looked for it to guide us to the altar of liberty it has suddenly gone down. Too melancholy is its contemplation for me to pursue it further.

I beg leave, before proceeding further, briefly to allude to a part of the speech of the honorable gentleman from Pennsylvania, [Mr. STEVENS,] in which it suited his purpose to allude to white laborers of the South in terms not only offensive to their representatives, but highly disrespectful to themselves. He was pleased to say that they were denied the association of that part of the community that held slaves, and that their association necessarily was with the *negro*. To such an assertion I must reply that it is utterly untrue, and that many of my constituents are those who labor and do not own slaves, and who not only associate with the best of slaveholders, but are considered equal in society to the man that owns his hundreds; and, sir, would be considered at least the equal of the gentleman himself. Sir, being a slaveholder myself, I scorn to tolerate for a moment such a distinction; and I am sure, if the gentleman had been acquainted with what constituted qualification for society in my section, (being virtue and intelligence,) he never would have given utterance to such a sentiment. I shall not notice him further, having had time for the sober second thought since the declaration fell from his lips. I have concluded to omit language that I should have commanded at the moment, had I been able to have got the floor; I certainly would have dealt with the honorable gentleman with gloves off. I had intended to have paid my respects to the venerable and honorable gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. MANN,] to have shown how much he loved the Union, and to have closely scrutinized his position, to have seen how it would have stood the test after his answer to the question my colleague [Mr. BOWDON] put to him, but time will not allow. I will therefore leave the country and the world to reply, after reading his speech.

Now, sir, I desire to address myself for a few minutes to those who express a determination to attach the proviso to all territorial bills. Why do you insist upon its passage when you contend that slavery is already excluded by the laws of Mexico from that territory? Why insist upon it, when you admit that there is a higher law yet (that of

nature) which will exclude it? The latter law, I am very much inclined to believe, will. It is almost certain that negroes will never be taken there (if at all) in any other than very inconsiderable numbers, while there are other countries better adapted and more accessible. It would be many years, if ever, before slavery would find its way there. In the mean time, the country would be settled up mostly by northern and western men from non-slaveholding States. Then, would it not be reasonable to suppose, a large number, if not nearly all the citizens, when the States come to form their constitutions, would exclude it? Should they, at a proper time, elect not to have slavery, the South would most cheerfully yield to the will of those who, we hold, are properly authorized to determine for themselves their own local laws not incompatible with the Constitution of the Federal Government. Then, with all these facts in your favor, will you rush on to do that by which you can make nothing, but which will destroy our mutual good relations, if not this happy Union, alone because you have the numerical strength, and because *power* has such charms that you desire to exercise it, for no other purpose than to show you can, that it may be said that "*I, yes, I did all this?*" If the latter be your true position, then is it not time for the South to distrust you as her faithful and just copartners, and claim that the copartnership be dissolved ere we get deeper and more firmly in your grasp? Such a course as this causes your southern copartners to feel goaded almost to madness, to think, while you are professing nothing but a desire for the country to be free territory, yet you are not willing for it to become so in the natural and legitimate course of things. Now, under a sense of duty to my country, I beseech all sections to return to a proper reflection, and let reason take the throne; lay aside bitterness and denunciation, and let us reason together as becomes brethren, statesmen, and patriots; let us come together, meet, and again renew our fraternal vows, before God and the country, to deal justly with each other. The South desires no advantage of the North. "Justice and equity" is her motto—inscribed not upon fading canvas, nor pronounced by hypocritical lips, but written upon the tablets of each southern heart. This, in the main, I believe to be true; thus believing, I speak it before God and the world.

Mr. Chairman, let me ask, *what is union of States without communion of the people?* Let those who sow the seeds of discord answer. Now, in these perilous times, where is New York? Have you no sacrifices to make? And the New England States, have you forgot the struggle of our forefathers, who, side by side, toiled together, achieving victory after victory? Where are our western brethren and kinsmen? Have we not in common suffered together, to make the desert, valley, and the mountain-top blossom as the rose? Where is old Pennsylvania, the Keystone State? Have you not got a spirit that can come to the rescue, and place the key-stone that shall forever fasten the arch together? Where are our southern brethren? Have we nothing to lay upon the common altar, as a sacrifice for peace, when the question of expediency and propriety only is involved? Where is our blood-cemented Constitution? Does it not yet command our admiration and respect? Come, brethren of the North, and of the South let us all

rally around the altar of Justice and Peace, and plant our feet upon the platform of the Constitution, and, as friends and brethren, renew our vows to perpetuate it forever, by respecting its mandates. Where is the Father of his country? Though he may be in his grave, can we not, in view of his portrait, emulate his example? Where is his devoted spirit? Does it not stalk abroad? If so, come now—yes, and come quickly—and inspire us with love of country, and each other, and that union of spirit that existed in days which tried men's souls. Where is the memory of those blood-bought liberties which have been our boast and pride, and that we have so long enjoyed? Come, Spirit of love for our country, and tell us of the day our fathers pledged themselves to live and die for each other; come, and tell us of the blood that was shed at Bunker's Hill, Saratoga, Yorktown, King's Mountain, the Cowpens, Camden, and Lundy's Lane—yes, and remind us of the toils at New Orleans, Emucpaw, Talodega, and the Horse-Shoe Bend. Again; tell us, in thunder-tones, of the brothers' blood that baptized the banks of the Rio Grande, and of victories won in common, by the North and the South. After all this, shall it be said it was all in vain? If this is not enough to fill our souls with devotion for our country, tell us of the infancy of our Government; tell us of its progress from a handful of oppressed Pilgrim-Fathers, to a mighty nation, of over twenty millions of freemen; tell us of the greatness and extent of our domain—reaching from the Atlantic to the Pacific—yes, and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Lakes; tell us of our destiny, if peace and union reign.

Sir, my imagination here, in spite of me, takes a flight—skipping over the plain of time, and there peeping into the Book of Fate, (where, if peace reigns,) I see inscribed upon her highest pyramids, "America! happy America! the asylum for the poor, and a home for the oppressed! Mighty and great thou art, and shalt ever be!!" But if discord and internal strife prevail, let us hear our destiny. I falter—the picture is too appalling to describe.

For the sake, then, of perpetuating all these blessings that await us, and in view of the evil that might befall us, let us come, as one common family, and cast upon one common altar our sacrifices, and bid the troubled ocean be hushed; and let one common voice burst forth from this Hall, and go out to every hamlet and mountain, saying, Peace, peace, all is well—all is well! Yes, let us bid that glorious banner that now waves over us, wave on, over every land and every sea, without one *star or stripe being erased*. Sir, let me not live to behold that old ship, the Constitution and Union, that has borne us through peril and danger to our present greatness, as she now so proudly floats, coming into port heavily laden with prosperity, dashed back by the surging waves of discord and be forever lost; yes, lost forever! May God save us from such a calamity! Is not, Mr. Chairman, this a time when the most skillful mariners are called to the helm to bring, if possible the ship and moor her safely in the harbor? Do I not, at this appalling moment, hear the eagle, the bird of liberty, cry out and say, "I have seen laurel after laurel gathered; I have heard the words Liberty, liberty, victory, victory, verberating and reverberating over all the land? I have seen our stars

and stripes wave, yes, proudly wave. I have seen them upheld by the North and by the South. I have seen the citizens of Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and other northern States, mingle with the citizens of the sunny South, of the Carolinas; Georgia, the Old Dominion, and their southern sisters, not in strife against, but in defence of each other. I have seen acquisition after acquisition made through their joint efforts, until I can now place my feet upon the Gulf of Mexico, flap my wings in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and dip my bill in the chrystal streams of the Columbia. Yes, I have turned my eyes over all this land and every sea on earth, and there I have beheld our glorious stars and stripes proudly waving, telling to all who may behold them, the *union* of our *representatives* carries with it the mandates of a free, happy, and independent nation, 'asking for nothing but what is right and submitting to nothing that is wrong.' "

And now I ask, is there no star of hope to arise which can guide us to a political savior, be he from the North or from the South, from the manger or from the palace, from the noble or the ignoble? Is there not to be found *one* who will come forward, and, if necessary, offer himself as a sacrifice for his country's salvation? I hope there is: I believe there is: I pray there is, be he a member of this or the other House. And if one is to be found, is there not another and another—yes, and still others? May a proper spirit send an abundance to aid in this great work! Or shall I behold, as I do on one hand, the portrait of the Father of his country, and read his Farewell Address; and on the other, see one who for love of liberty left his own native France and came to aid us in throwing off the yoke of tyranny and to establish liberty here—shall I hear drop from the lips of those illustrious spirits, "All, all our efforts were in vain?" Shall I, with that eagle in my eye, be constrained in my place before this vexed question be settled, to see its mournful flight and hear her say, "I have watched my country through peril and through danger into greatness; I have heard the lion howl under my talons; I have bid him cease his roaring, and he has obeyed; I have heard the savage yells hushed before me; yes, and I have seen still more—the nations of the Old World point to my happy country, and express a desire to drink out of our fountain of liberty—to drink of which would gladden the hearts of down-trodden Poland, Hungary, and Ireland? Yes; and I have witnessed still more—our country an asylum for the oppressed. But in case of a dissolution I must be perched upon some lonely peak, stripped of my beautiful companions, (the stripes and stars,) disconsolate and alone, there to behold brothers not standing shoulder to shoulder defending in common their once beloved country, but in deadly hostile array—father imbruing his hand in the blood of his son—brother engaged in deadly strife with

brother, and the happy hearthstone and the beautiful greens upon which the juveniles used to meet and sport, drinking the blood of that father whose delight it was to look over their innocent amusement. Then will I not hear the voice of disconsolation, the broken-hearted and forlorn widow and mother crying, where is my husband, the staff and support of my life?" All, all this is but the last sound of liberty; and we will become the by-word of other nations—that man is not capable of self-government now.

Mr. Chairman, with all these pictures before us, would to God that I had the power to summon to the midst of us such a spirit as actuated our devoted (and should be revered) ancestors; that guided them, in days of peril, to love and defend each other; that led them to glory and renown. Now, sir, in conclusion, can we not find a mariner that will engage to bring our blessed old ship, the *Union*, into port upon *just, equitable*, and constitutional principles? Sir, may the Father of lights so direct the storm, that she may ride proudly and bravely over the dashing billows, and be the means of bringing into port cargo after cargo of free and yet unborn millions. Yes, blessed old craft!—thee I love and adore, and to thee I *will cling*, as long as one plank can be found; so long as your anchor shall be the *Constitution*—so long as your *chart and compass* shall be its provisions.

These, sir, are my sentiments; and thus believing, I have ventured to express them, speaking for none but myself. I now say, my destiny is fixed with the whole country, and particularly with the South. Her prosperity is mine; her fate is and will be mine; her exaltation or degradation *shall* be mine, come what will; be it for weal or woe, I am resolved to share her fate. Then, if, as one of her sons, I am to choose between degradation and death, my grave sooner than the former. I trust, in my desultory remarks, I have not been offensive to any person or section of the country; for, knowing the sensitiveness of my own feelings, and that I desire them to be respected, in charity I wish to deal the same measure to others.

It may not be amiss to notice the many paragraphs I see in various newspapers of the day, stating that the South has abandoned, in a measure, the holding of the Nashville Convention. It is true a large body of the people have; but it is proper for the North and others to know why; it is because, from some movements of distinguished men of both political parties, in the Senate and elsewhere, they are led to believe the questions that agitate the country, and in which they felt and still feel so much interest, will be by this Congress, fairly, honorably, and justly settled. Thus believing, they desire no further action. But, it is equally proper for me to say, should the proviso pass as to the territories, or any other kindred measure, there will be but one voice in the South; that is, resistance "at all hazard and to the last extremity."

